

**Black American Adolescent Females Sexual Activity Pattern:
Abstainers, Mothers, and Those In Between**

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Adolescent sexual behavior has been the subject of much concern over the past 15 years. Pregnancy and childbirth rates among unmarried adolescents increased to epidemic proportions during the 1980s. These trends, though are sometimes attributed to the changing sexual patterns among White adolescents, continue to show that Blacks have disproportionate representation with regards to early sexual onset, pregnancy, and childbirths. Moreover, Black adolescent females become sexually active, on average, age 14.4 years, compared to 16.3 years for their White female (Zelnik & Shah, 1983). Demographers have predicted that 40 percent of all 14-year-olds in the United States will become pregnant before their twentieth birthday and that Blacks will be disproportionately represented in these statistics (Lancaster & Hamburg, 1986). Given these patterns, a few researchers have begun to unravel the significance of race and class in understanding the sexual behavior patterns of American youth.

What follows is a brief overview of the sexuality literature with specific emphasis on Black American adolescent females. In this paper I will focus on: (1) methodological issues inherent in this field of research, (2) determine whether the characterization is/was an over generalization of the phenomenon, and (3) provide a basis for the need to view sexuality as a developmental process, rather than focusing only on risk taking behaviors.

Methodological Issues

In recent years, some researchers have argued that many of the findings regarding Black-White differences in sexual activity can be attributed to sampling bias. That is, the majority of studies on Black adolescent females tend to be based on data obtained from nonprobability, and convenient clinical samples of low-income youth. Information from these youth are then compared to middle-income Whites (Chilman, 1980; Murry, 1992; Weddle, McKenry, & Leigh, 1988). Such sampling bias not only gives a distorted view of adolescents' sexual behavior pattern, but also fosters stereotypes and perpetuates myths that "Blacks are more sexually permissive than are Whites" (Reiss, 1965, p.51), and that "out-of-wedlock" pregnancy and childbearing are more socially acceptable in the Black community (Miller, 1983). Further, such research designs leave a void in our knowledge about within-group differences that may exist among White youth, such as variation in the sexual behavior of middle-class versus low-income White youth. In order to more adequately understand the sexual behavior pattern of adolescents, there is a need to include research designs which clarify differences and may "reveal previously unsuspected problems in data and analysis . . .

, and the inadequacy of accepted ideas about solving problems" (Cohen & Weiss, 1977, pp.68-69).

Incidences of Sexual Activity, Pregnancy Rate, and Motherhood

Results from a 1988 national study revealed that all Black adolescent females are not sexually active. In fact, among Black females aged 15 to 21 years, 38 percent were virgins. Distribution of age at first onset for the remaining 62 percent, who had become sexually active, reflected that one-fourth became sexually active age 14 years or younger, 22 percent age 15, 23 percent age 16, and 30 percent were age 17 years or older. Slightly over half of the girls did not have sexual intercourse until age 16 years or older. Further, the majority of those who were sexually active had never been pregnant (65%). Those who had become pregnant were, on average, age 16 years when the event occurred. In regards to pregnancy outcomes, 64 percent kept and raised their babies, 16 percent had induced abortions, 8 percent miscarried, 2 percent had stillbirths, and 10 percent were pregnant at the time of interview (Murry, 1994). Knowledge about the context of these sexual, pregnancy, and childbirth experiences is often lacking. For example, many of their sexual experiences may have occurred through sexual coercion or rape.

Abstinence

What factors motivate Black adolescent females to abstain from sexual intercourse? Researchers have found that this decision occurs more frequently among those who live with both biological parents, have incomes of middle- to upper-income levels, and have educated mothers (academic training post-high school). In addition, abstinence among Black adolescent females has also been associated with open communication between adolescents and parents about such sexual issues such as anatomy and physiology, how pregnancy occurs, contraceptive use, and sexually transmitted diseases. Those not sexually active are also more likely to report being exposed to fairly strict discipline and having parents who supervise their dating practices. Other correlates include being involved in church activities, having high goals in the family regarding achievement in the areas of education and work, as well as having employment opportunities during adolescence (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Murry, 1995). Further, an examination of post-high school life trajectories based on adolescent sexual and motherhood status during high school, revealed that virgins had completed more years of education. At the same time, virgins were just as likely as adolescent mothers to report being single and never-married five years after graduating high school. The impact of increasing sex-ratio imbalance on the marriage market of Black American men and women has received some attention in recent years (Staples & Johnson, 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census. Yet, the interplay of sexual activity,

fertility patterns, and declining in marriage (Tucker & Mitchell-Kerman, 1995) among Blacks is often ignored as attempts are undertaken to understand the increasing rates of single, female-headed families.

Sexually Active, Never Pregnant

Many of the same factors that motivate Black girls to abstain from sexual intercourse also foster responsible behavior once they become sexually active. In addition to correlates discussed above, those who become sexually active and have successfully prevented pregnancy tend to be effective contraceptive users, and are more likely to have used a medically prescribed method at first coitus. These girls also report having access to reproductive health care services, and having annually sexual health check-ups at local clinics. Sexually active, never-pregnant Black adolescents seem to be more knowledgeable about contraceptive methods, and tend to more readily select medically prescribed methods than those who become pregnant. Those less vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies were also more likely to wait until late adolescence before becoming sexually active; sexual onset more often did not occur until at least 3 years post-menarche (Murry, 1995).

Adolescent Mothers: Does Graduating High School Make a Difference?

Much of the research on adolescent childbearing implies that having a child "off-time" places adolescents at a great disadvantage in terms of future life options. Inherent in this assumption is that by postponing sexual activity enhances opportunities for living the "American Dream," educational advancement, employment in a prestigious position, and love and marriage. Though lack of social and economic opportunities, as well as the inability to view early childbearing as an opportunity cost, are offered as explanations for high fertility rates among African American adolescents (Eisen, Zellman, Leibowitz, Chow, & Evans, 1983; Hardy & Zabin, 1991), the extent to which adolescent childbearing preclude the attainment of future life goals (Elise, 1995; Geronimus, 1991; Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990) has been questioned. Further, other researchers contend that adolescents must be given more tangible reasons to delay childbearing (Chilman, 1980; Murry, 1994; Scott-Jones & Turner, 1988). For example, race, family size, availability of educational materials in the home, employment status of the adolescent's mother, parents' level of education, and other prior problems in school are integral predictors of school completion. Similar

findings were reported by other researchers (Murry, 1996; Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). It has been suggested that the negative outcomes often associated with adolescent motherhood are substantially reduced when research designs control for educational attainment (Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). Thus, "early childbearing, in and of itself, may not contribute to poor outcomes" (Geronimus, 1991, p. 464).

A more adequate assessment of the consequences of adolescent childbearing can be obtained by studying these individual over time. Results from a 17 year follow-up study on Baltimorean African American adolescent mothers revealed that over time a significant proportion were able to partially recover from their "off-time" parental experiences (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989).

Sexuality and Social Class

Living in mixed social class environments has been associated with delayed sexual onset and reduced childbearing rates among African American adolescents (Crane, 1991). Having regular access to role models in prestigious employment positions appears to change adolescents' perceptions of both real and perceived opportunities for future life options (Henly, 1993). How does the sexual career paths of middle-class Black Americans differ from those of low-income status? This significance of social class in understanding this phenomenon is often ignored because it is assumed that Black Americans are monolithic. Available research study of middle-class Black females revealed that, regardless of family structure or mother's work pattern, sexual timing is related to place of residence, parental discipline, sexual conversations between mothers and daughters, and daughters' level of contraception and reproductive knowledge. There is a need for additional work in this area.

Conclusions

In conclusion, one can not ignore the numerous problems associated with children having children. At the same time, the extent to which assumptions inherent in this field of study need to be considered to more adequately assess the nature of the problems. Many of the messages imply that by becoming sexually active and having a child as an unmarried adolescence, somehow, decreases life options to go to college, obtain a high prestigious job, and get married. It remains unclear how or if sexual behavior patterns influence life options. This seem central given that racism and discrimination continue to interfere with present and future life options for Black Americans. If we, as a

society, are serious about combatting adolescent parenthood and the negative consequences associated with early childbearing, more attention needs to be given to eliminating structural inequalities and racism. Further, in light of what has been presented here, adolescents must have reasons, as well as structural support to say "NO" to sex and "NO" to pregnancy and motherhood. Today's youth must be able to foresee the opportunity costs associated with sexual risk taking. Finally, more consideration should be devoted to understanding this phenomenon from the adolescent's perspective. For example, do adolescents view early childbearing as a minor annoyance, benefit, or burden? How burdensome is it for adolescents to avoid pregnancy and childbearing? We can not assume that adolescents do not **plan** the birth of their children.

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